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SALT Shelving May Lift Defense Budget, But Big U.S. Policy Changes Aren't Seen

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WASHINGTON—President Carter's decision to shelve the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty will mean more defense spending and perhaps some new weapons systems.

However, it probably won't produce convulsive changes in U.S. defense policy, according to military analysts and politicians here.

The decision to defer Senate consideration of SALT "in light of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan" had been expected. It was announced in a letter yesterday to Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd (D., W.Va.). Mr. Carter said he wanted "to defer the debate so that the Congress and I as President can assess Soviet actions and intentions and . . . respond to this crisis."

Although Mr. Carter left open the possibility that the SALT debate might resume after "more urgent issues have been addressed," most anlaysts predict that the treaty's chances are dead for this year. And that poses the question that the Carter administration had hoped it wouldn't have to answer: What happens to U.S. policy in the absence of SALT?

The answer depends partly on what the Soviets do. Both the Russians and the U.S have been abiding by limits on missile launchers that were spelled out in the first SALT agreement, even though that pact expired in 1977. If the Soviets continue to exercise restraint, U.S. officials say this nation likely will follow suit.

"What we do depends on what they do," said one top-level administration official.

White House spokesman Jody Powell said the President plans to send Congress legislation in connection with the invasion. He declined to give details, but a senior White House official said the proposals would "contribute to the stability and the protection of national independence" of countries in that area. One option would be legislation to allow Pakistan to buy arms on credit. Under federal law, Pakistan can buy arms only for cash because it hasn't promised that it won't develop nuclear weapons. Such a move would upset India, however, which has fought three wars with Pakistan.

Mr. Powell did say that some of the proposals "may have a budgetary impact." This could suggest higher defense spending.

Disdaining diplomatic etiquette, the U.S. didn't notify the Kremlin prior to the decision to delay SALT. Officials say Moscow hasn't responded through diplomatic channels, although the Soviet news agency, Tass, denounced President Carter for using Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan as a pretext for postponing the treaty.

Several leading Senators yesterday played down the prospect of dramatic changes because of SALT's apparent collapse. Republican Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee told reporters, "I don't think it's going to make much difference with or without SALT" in terms of defense spending. Sen. Baker, a critic of the treaty, argued that the U.S. must "stiffen its back" to meet the Soviet challenge.

Sen. Henry Jackson (D., Wash.), long a vociferous critic of the treaty, argued in a telephone interview that "the biggest danger" is that the Carter administration might "overreact" to the treaty's delay. Sen. Jackson added: "We ought to be cautious and sensible, and we shouldn't undertake programs that won't help" U.S. security.

Defense analysts yesterday cited several areas where the U.S. might adjust its policies to cope with a world without SALT. The key issues facing President Carter and Congress, these analysts say, are likely to include:

—Development of a new, "unverifiable" mobile-missile system for deployment with the U.S.. The existing plan for a "race track" mobile missile, whose movements could be detected by the Soviets in accord with SALT, is likely to be scuttled.

—Whether to revive plans for a new strategic bomber, similar to the B1 project that the Carter administration killed in 1977. Sen. Baker said yesterday that he would support construction of such a plane, and other Congressmen are likely to agree. Deployment of a new bomber fleet could cost more than $25 billion.

—Improvements in other strategic forces and in conventional weapons systems. This will also cost money. The Carter administration had already proposed increasing defense authorizations over the next five years by 4.8% annually, after taking inflation into account. Analysts yesterday predicted that in coming months congressional debate could center on "real" increases closer to 8% a year.

—Possible renunciation of an existing treaty with the Soviets that bans deployment of antiballistic missiles. Without SALT's limits on the number of warheads the Soviets can aim at U.S. targets, it's argued that the U.S. might need defensive missiles to protect its own land-based launchers from a Russian saturation attack. Analysts predict that the ABM issue could be the thorniest, and potentially most dangerous, problem to arise if arms-limitation efforts collapse.

—The future of arms-control efforts with the Soviets. U.S. analysts predict that any future discussions with the Russians, or any decision by Mr. Carter to revive efforts to ratify the treaty, will hinge on Soviet conduct. If the Russians move to conceal their weapons testing from U.S. surveillance, or if they attempt to violate the old treaty's limits, then arms control might suffer a death blow. The U.S., according to a high administration official, intends to abide by the terms of the expired agreement, unless the Soviets signal their intention to violate it.

With U.S.-Soviet relations already severely strained, the decision to postpone SALT eliminates a key stabilizing element in the relationship. For Moscow, the economic benefits of detente, such as American credits and preferential tariff treatment, never materialized. So, increasingly, SALT became the major link between two superpowers that could agree on little else.

"We consider it very serious to postpone what was meant to be a major element of stability in our relations," says one administration official.